



Assessment of the Future Leaders Exchange (FLEX) Program

Executive Report

July 2003

PURPOSE OF THE EVALUATION

In December 2002, the U.S. Department of State's Office of Policy and Evaluation in the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA) selected Aguirre International to conduct an assessment of the Future Leaders Exchange (FLEX) program based on data collected by the University of Iowa Social Science Institute. The focus of the assessment was to document the outcomes of the program, to assess its impact, and to link these outcomes and impacts to the legislative mandates under which the program operates.

The FLEX program is the U.S. government's premier youth exchange program, funded by the U.S. Department of State through the FREEDOM ("Freedom for Russian and Emerging Eurasian Democracies and Open Markets") Support Act of 1992, which supports activities that contribute to economic and democratic reform and development in the countries of the former Soviet Union.

The program sponsors secondary school students from the countries of the former Soviet Union (the New Independent States, or NIS) for a year of study in the United States. Since FLEX began in 1993, more than 11,000 students from the NIS have spent an academic year in American high schools and lived with U.S. host families throughout the United States.¹

OVERALL ASSESSMENT

The foremost goals of the FLEX program are to provide an introduction to civil society, and to foster mutual understanding and appreciation. All alumni supported this goal through their day-to-day experiences in their host families, their interaction and participation in their communities and schools, and the presentations that they made about their home countries. But the FLEX program also advances the broad goals of economic and political transition in the NIS countries. It does this by giving to talented and motivated individuals the opportunity to have significant experiences in the United States and then to return home to apply their new-found knowledge and understanding. The alumni learn both positive and negative things about life in the United States and acquire a more balanced and tempered view of the culture, of the market economy, and of how democracy and civil society works.

However, while alumni may attest to the value of this experience and of its impact on them, these perceptions do not demonstrate that they are in fact different from their non-participating peers. A better test of the impact of the program comes in making a comparison, comparing their activities, values, and attitudes with those of an equivalent group who did not participate in the program. That group is the semi-finalists, those who applied to FLEX and who successfully passed through most phases of selection but who did not ultimately go the United States. This is

¹ This figure includes the current 1,265 participants.

<http://exchanges.state.gov/education/citizens/students/eurasia/flex/goals.htm>.

a particularly rigorous test, given the competitiveness of the application process, in which approximately 2 percent of those who take the initial English test perform are ultimately selected to participate in the program.

The evaluation thus sets the values and accomplishments of FLEX alumni next to those of FLEX semi-finalists. As a result, the assessment shows that the program is reinforcing and developing skills and attitudes needed to take part in the new market economies. Comparisons were also made between the two groups with respect to their leadership qualities, engagement in civil society, understanding of the United States, and the degree to they are creating enduring ties with U.S. institutions and with American citizens. The analysis shows that program alumni are indeed different.

FLEX alumni are significantly more likely than the semi-finalists to:

- have full comprehension of written and spoken English and use it daily;
- have learned computer skills and use the Internet daily;
- pay themselves or have their employers pay for their university educations;
- be employed full-time;
- be paid in dollars and, when paid in dollars, to earn significantly more;
- articulate what job they wanted to hold in five years;
- live independently of their parents or relatives; and
- be fully satisfied with their lives.

Aguirre International therefore concludes that the FLEX program is successfully fulfilling its mandate in supporting mutual understanding and appreciation, market reform, democratic attitudes, and engagement in civil society.

PROGRAM GOALS

The FLEX Program shares the same overarching legislative goals as other NIS programs funded by ECA, which are to

- contribute to economic and democratic reform and development in the independent states of the former Soviet Union, as specified in the FREEDOM Support Act (FSA) legislation; and
- contribute to the broader mission of the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs in promoting mutual understanding through exchange activity, as mandated by the Mutual Educational and Cultural Exchange (Fulbright-Hays) Act of 1961.

More specifically, the FLEX program is designed so that:

- FLEX students will acquire an understanding of the important elements of civil society, including concepts such as volunteerism, the idea that American citizens can and do act on their own to deal with societal problems, and an awareness of and respect for the rule of law.
- FLEX students will show willingness and commitment to serve as agents for change in their countries after they return home.

- FLEX students will develop an appreciation for American culture.
- FLEX students will interact with Americans and generate enduring ties.
- FLEX students will teach Americans about the cultures of their home countries and teach citizens of their home countries about the United States.

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

To be selected for the program, FLEX participants undergo an incredibly rigorous application process. The process includes two initial tests of English language ability, a written application, and group interviews. Approximately 30 percent of those who take the initial English tests go on to the second round pre-TOEFL test; more or less one-third of the pre-TOEFL takers are then invited to complete the application and participate in group interviews, and ultimately, only about 20 percent of this group are selected as finalists. Final selection is ultimately based upon English ability, personality factors, social skills, academic achievement, and leadership potential. For the 2001-2002 academic year, for example, 51,583 participated in the initial screening, 14,646 advanced to second pre-TOEFL test, 6,091 completed applications and participated in the group interviews, and only 1,211 were selected as finalists.

The FLEX application process ensures that students from throughout each participating country have an equal opportunity to be selected (thereby ensuring no overrepresentation of students from capital cities). FLEX also includes a component for physically disabled students, which provides an opportunity for these students to travel abroad – a program characteristic not available under most other exchange programs. The program is administered by American Councils for International Education (ACTR/ACCELS).

EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

This evaluation sought to understand the impact of the FLEX program on students who participated between 1993 and 2000. Four countries were chosen for the study: Armenia, Russia, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan. During the period under study (1993-2000), 3,574 FLEX participants were selected from Russia, 1,356 from Ukraine, 275 from Armenia, and 339 from Uzbekistan to spend an academic year in the United States.

Program evaluations such as this one seek to understand the impact of the program on the lives of the participants. Evaluations generally try to isolate the effects of the “treatment” – participation in the FLEX program – by comparing participants with others who are as similar as possible on all other measures. As discussed above, the FLEX program, because of its rigorous selection process, has a valuable set of comparison students, the semi-finalists. The semi-finalists provide as close a “match” to the alumni as it is possible to have.

FLEX alumni and semi-finalists from Russia, Ukraine, Armenia, and Uzbekistan participated in face-to-face interviews and focus groups conducted by the University of Iowa Social Science Institute supported by local social research organizations. Interviews and focus

Country	Alumni	Semi-finalists
Russia	443	218
Ukraine	464	252
Armenia	71	119
Uzbekistan	151	223

groups were conducted in 2001 with 1,159 alumni and 812 semi-finalists (see table above). At the time of the interviews, alumni and semi-finalists were between the ages of 16 (very few cases) and 26 (again, very few cases). The evaluation should be read with the ages of the respondents in mind: they are very young and yet both groups have accomplished a great deal both academically and professionally.

PROGRAM FINDINGS

The evaluation shows that the FLEX program is meeting its goals. Moreover, alumni reported that they were very happy with their FLEX experiences. Perhaps one of the most startling findings is that the FLEX program was and continues to be the only way for young students to come to the United States to study (or indeed, to study in any other country); only 30% of the FLEX alumni said that they would have been able to come to the United States without such a program and of the semi-finalists, only 7% have visited the United States or studied abroad.

<p><i>Goal 1: FLEX students will acquire an understanding of the important elements of civil society, including concepts such as volunteerism, the idea that American citizens can and do act on their own to deal with societal problems, and an awareness of and respect for the rule of law.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • During their year in the United States, 55% of the alumni participated in student government – a striking achievement, given that student government in the United States requires election. The very fact of participation by new (and foreign) students visiting for a single academic year indicates a high level of civic involvement and dedication to understanding the American high school experience. • Alumni are more self-reliant: they are less likely than semi-finalists to attribute success to outside forces or influential people (21% v. 29%). In addition, more alumni live in their own homes or apartments rather than with their parents or other relatives (e.g., among the oldest group interviewed, 61% of semi-finalists and only 48% of alumni lived with parents or relatives). Alumni are also significantly more likely to have worked to support themselves while at the university (72% v. 59%). • Alumni are more likely than semi-finalists (73% to 62%, respectively) to believe a Western-style democracy or other system would be better for their country than the current political system. • On a range of rule of law and democracy questions, alumni are <i>significantly</i> more likely than semi-finalists to prefer democracy over strong leadership in their own countries and to disagree with the use of force. Alumni are also more likely than semi-finalists to believe it is “always wrong” to restrict certain activities during times of instability.
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<p><i>Goal 2: FLEX students will show willingness and commitment to serve as agents for change in their countries after they return home.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alumni hold more “democratic” workplaces attitudes than semi-finalists. When asked questions about work authority and supervision, alumni were more likely to seek input from those under them and give those they supervise more freedom. • More than 60% of alumni reported that their exchange experience influenced their educational or career choices. • Alumni are more likely than semi-finalists to work in business management or languages. • Alumni are more likely than semi-finalists to be paid in U.S. dollars, and of those respondents who are paid in dollars, alumni earn 3.5 times the income of semi-finalists. FLEX alumni are thus more likely to enter the “dollar” sectors of the economy and, when they do, they earn substantially more than semi-finalists. • Alumni are also more likely to have a vision for their careers and jobs than semi-finalists; 80% were able to articulate what kind of job they wanted to have in five years, compared to 59% of the semi-finalists. • Overall, alumni are more satisfied with their lives than are semi-finalists: 32% of alumni and 25% of semi-finalists are “fully satisfied” with their lives as a whole.
<p><i>Goal 3: FLEX students will develop an appreciation for American culture.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ninety-five percent of alumni visited states other than their state of residence during the program, and 15% of alumni visited eight or more states. In addition, 98% of alumni visited historical sites during their stay, with 40% visiting historical sites as often as weekly or monthly. • When asked about the most important thing they learned about the United States during their FLEX experience, alumni were more likely to comment on American freedom and equal rights. • Alumni reported a higher comprehension of English newspapers and movies than semi-finalists (78% and 83% of alumni felt they had mastery, respectively of English newspapers and movies, while only 41% and 37% of semi-finalists made the same claim). • Alumni are more likely to use English daily at work. • Nearly all (94%) disabled FLEX participants stated that their experience in the United States was <i>not</i> adversely affected by their physical challenges.
<p><i>Goal 4: FLEX students will interact with Americans and generate enduring ties.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some 80% of alumni reported they are still in contact with their host families. • Seventy-five percent of alumni are still in contact with classmates or friends they met in the United States, with 12% maintaining weekly or daily contact. • About 80% of alumni are in contact (monthly or more frequently) with other FLEX alumni they met while in the United States. • Twenty-six percent of alumni reported that someone they met while in the United States has visited them since the end of their FLEX program. • More alumni than semi-finalists have access to the Internet and email (44% of alumni report having daily Internet access, while only 24% of semi-finalists do so).

Goal 5: FLEX students will teach Americans about the cultures of their home countries and teach citizens of their home countries about the United States.

- Ninety-three percent of alumni made formal presentations about their home countries while in the United States, and more than a quarter (27%) made presentations monthly, weekly, or daily.

A PLAN FOR THE FUTURE

This review of findings shows that the FLEX program is successfully fulfilling its mandate in fostering the development of young agents of change in the countries studied. The program encourages new attitudes, values and practices that support market reform and the growth of democratic institutions. It also clearly plays an important role in increasing mutual understanding between the peoples of the United States and the NIS. All these factors lead the evaluators to recommend that the FLEX program continue to be one of the hallmark exchange programs between the United States and the NIS region.

The logic behind the program is to give extraordinary young people the opportunity to experience a new world, to learn from that new world and expand their own vision of what is possible, and then to return home to *make a difference*. The first step is clearly taking place: alumni are indeed changed as a result of the program experience. Because of their youth when they take part in the program, they are only now moving into professional and community positions where they can influence wider spheres, the organizations in which they work and volunteer and the communities in which they live. However, thanks to the FLEX program's strong alumni activities, these young people appear to be able to move back into their home countries with facility and have already created wide-ranging networks that are likely to support them as they ascend to positions of increasing influence and responsibility. The FLEX program thus stands out as a flagship undertaking for the United States and is likely to have an increasingly beneficial impact on the relations between the peoples of the United States and the NIS.

Prepared for:
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Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs
U.S. Department of State

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